WASHINGTON POST
19 January 1985

JACK ANDERSON

Pilot Last to Know of Weather Threat

The government can send dozens of astronauts safely into space with pinpoint accuracy. But it still can't tell an airline pilot what kind of weather he's about to fly into any better than it could 20 years ago.

So the next time your in-flight meal bounces up in your face, don't blame the pilot.

Eighteen months ago, a representative of the Air Line Pilots Association told a House subcommittee, "The pilot flying today has little more in the way of real-time weather information available to him than his predecessor 20 years ago." An ALPA official told my associate Tony Capaccio that this statement is still valid.

A still-unreleased report by the staff of the House Public Works investigations subcommittee concludes that a pilot, with hundreds of lives depending on him, may be the last to know about severe weather conditions that are about to batter his plane.

The problem isn't detecting the dangerous weather condition. As the space program has demonstrated, technology exists to spot the proverbial cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Radar stations, satellites, weather balloons and ground sensors gather raw information and feed it to computers that digest it in seconds.

Incredibly, the problem is getting the information to the pilots who need it most. As far back as 1975, congressional hearings found that the life-or-death information was not being disseminated through the Federal Aviation Administration's air traffic control system, as it should have been.

Nothing seems to have changed in the past decade. The House subcommittee staff report analyzed two years of testimony on weather-related hazards and says, "In every weather-related airline accident reported at these hearings, somebody in the dissemination system knew of the hazard, but the individual who didn't know, in each case, was the pilot."

One tragic example of this flaw in the system was the crash of a Pan Am jet on takeoff at New Orleans July 9, 1982, killing 153 people.

Instruments on the ground had detected evidence of violent horizontal gusts, known as wind shear, but there was no established method for relaying the information to the pilot as the doomed plane roared down the runway a few hundred yards from the control tower.

After summing up the advances in detection and communication equipment in recent years, the subcommittee report states bluntly, "There is no excuse for this failure [to disseminate] when the technology exists to alert pilots."

The staff report chastises the FAA for failing to tell the subcommittee during the 2½ years of hearings about delays in five systems being developed to improve detection of weather hazards and transmit the information to pilots.

An FAA spokesman's excuse for this lapse was worthy of the CIA explaining why it hadn't told Congress about its mining of Nicaraguan harbors: Nobody asked.

"When we testified, we were asked to tell about current program status and we did," the FAA spokesman said. Had they been asked about delays, he said, "we would have answered."